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ABSTRACT

One of a series of practitioner-oriented newsletters, the document provides elementary school principals with tips for dealing with stress. Because principals spend approximately 80 percent of their workday in face-to-face interchanges (with staff, faculty, parents, and others), the article gives warning signals indicative of too much stress. A brief distinction between self-imposed and situational stress is followed by a list of basic techniques for averting stress. In contrast, the article also discusses behavior that should be avoided in an effective stress management plan and concludes with a word about commitment as an essential ingredient for any stress management technique. (LH)

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DEALING WITH STRESS

September 1983

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National Association of Elementary School Principals
Reston, Virginia

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Dealing with Stress

Volume 2, Number 1 September 1983

Perhaps sometime, somewhere, someone will eliminate administrator stress.

Perhaps one day scientists will develop a laser beam that will zap stress out of existence or a new vaccine capable of making people immune to it.

For the present, however, most of us will have to be content with plain old-fashioned self-training, disciplining ourselves and working hard to handle the ups and downs of our lives. The fact is, some practical, sensible, and learnable techniques have been developed to keep stress under control.

Few people should be more interested in that proposition than elementary and middle school principals, for stress is an inherent element of their jobs. A study reported in the March 1982 *Principal* disclosed that whereas business executives rarely left their chairs, principals were rarely off their feet as they roamed their schools to keep things running smoothly.

The principals in another study were found to spend 80 percent of their workday in face-to-face interchanges with staff, faculty members, pupils, parents, and others; and an additional 8 percent in telephone interactions. Obviously a portion of those almost incessant interactions—for many principals the number was about 400 a day—carried a rich potential for inducing stress. The sheer act of dealing with so many people can be stressful. And just the number of decisions that principals have to make in the course of a given day would bewilder those not familiar with a school's routine.

This is not to say that stress is altogether bad. Indeed, one authority—Hans Selye—points out that to be free of stress is to be dead. In his book, *Stress Without Distress,* Selye defines stress as "the body's response to any demand made upon it." Many people—top professional golfers, for example—rather enjoy stress, or, at least, the confrontations that produce it.

Warning signals

For the rest of us, feeling stressed serves as a useful alarm system; signaling a need to examine what is happening in one's life. To ignore such signals is to invite exhaustion, destruction of confidence, and even death as the causes of stress (what Selye calls "stressors") become increasingly rife and uncontrollable.

Common initial indicators of stress include constant headaches, ulcers, low vitality, irritability, insomnia, indigestion, and lack of interest in or problems with sex. Unfortunately many people ignore these signals until the problems become chronic and seriously debilitating.

Research indicates that each of us has an inherent level of resistance to stress and that it exists in differing capacities in different people. Knowing how to manage stress during the initial stages—taking note of bodily signals, identifying the sources, and finally, developing stress management practices—is crucial.

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Self-imposed stress

Stress is in general classifiable as either self-imposed or situational. Self-imposed stress results most commonly from maintaining unrealistic expectations of what one can or should accomplish. Situational stress arises from one's environment, including the people who are a part of it.

Avoiding self-imposed stress is best achieved by learning to set realistic, achievable goals. At the very least, principals should keep in mind the following facts of the real world:

- You will not always have a positive effect on every student, teacher, or parent, or for that matter on your banker or barber or anyone else. If you make a real effort to be pleasant and constructive, and the other persons nonetheless are hostile, the sensible reaction is to recognize that they surely share at least part of the blame.
- There are limits to what your school and you personally can and should achieve. Many of the responsibilities that today's schools are commonly pressured to accept actually belong to the family unit. Make the appropriate distinctions and relay family responsibilities back where they belong. Your job is to be a principal, not a parent, although of course you should try to remain compassionate with regard to students' social and emotional needs.
- The public, your faculty, and your superiors will not be pleased with every decision you make.
- You will not be a model of wisdom and winning behavior on all occasions; like everyone else, you must sometimes settle for being human.
- It is not uncommon for people in all professions to feel a lack of recognition for the job that they do.

Situational stress

As for situational stress, since we cannot always control what happens around us, it helps to recognize that problems are bound to occur from time to time. Typical generators of situational stress are:

- Being denied a say in decisions that directly affect you,
- Having what you believe or value attacked or ignored by others,
- Finding yourself expected to support policies with which you are in philosophic disagreement,
- Being confronted by perceptions completely at odds with your own in regard to such important matters as student academic and behavioral standards,
- Facing difficulties in relationships with your relatives, or
- Experiencing loss of a loved one or an especially close and supportive friend.

We cannot control such situations; yet often we squirm over them as if we could. It is normal to be unhappy with matters of this kind, to feel grief at a loss, or simply to feel "down" as a result of less painful forms of situational stress, but it is important to keep in mind that we ourselves do not carry the full responsibility for them.

There are several important aspects of situational and self-imposed stress that should be considered.

Circumstances alter the impact and even the harm of a stressor, and the social and emotional context of an event is as important as what actually occurs. The first grader who tugs at your pant leg or skirt to show you a loose tooth is much more likely to get a favorable response if several other people are not also making demands of you.

Similarly important are the circumstances in which a stress-making event takes place. If you are not headed anywhere in particular, getting caught in a traffic jam is only a minor irritation; if you are headed for an important appointment, it can frazzle the nerves to the point of making you incoherent.

The effects of stress can be mitigated or exacerbated by coincidental events or thoughts. Usually these are psychological or social in nature. The grumpiness arising from a frustrating day at school can be wiped out by a phone call from a close friend or a night out at a good movie. The power of diversion is worth keeping in mind when you seek ways to deal with stress in a constructive fashion.

Keeping stress under control

Out of various experiences in which stress is sometimes provoked and sometimes averted have come several techniques for keeping it pretty well under control. Some of the most basic are these:

- Incorporate regularity into your life-style, including your sleeping habits, eating habits, bathroom habits, and exercise habits.
- Take vacations. Several organized short ones are best. Don't take work along, even in your head.
- Leave your professional worries at school. Otherwise you will be cheating your family of an important part of you, and robbing your students of the revitalization that will make you a more effective leader.
- If possible, leave your domestic troubles at home. If you bring them with you to work—if they are seldom out of your mind—your effectiveness will suffer and you may lose your support base of sympathetic friends.
- Recognize your fears and insecurities and face up to them. Determine what scares you and why. With that knowledge, try to avoid circumstances that provoke fear and also try to think of ways to deal with such circumstances.
- If fights are inevitable, try to pick the ones you are most likely to win.
- Help others as much as possible. While extending a portion of yourself to another, you will not only be behaving in an admirable manner but will have less time to dwell on your own troubles.
- Regularly participate in a physical activity you find enjoyable.
- Develop and take time for a hobby, particularly one that does not require the participation of another person.
- Walk briskly for at least 15 minutes a day. Medical literature suggests that this is one of the best of the various exercise programs.
- Be willing to compromise. A continual determination to have your own way indicates immaturity in your ability to listen and reason.
- Do what you know is right. Even minor instances of lying, cheating, or misuse of school property will produce nagging guilt feelings.
- Laugh loud and often, particularly at yourself.
- When confronted with a particular difficulty, analyze whether the problem is really yours. If it is not, give it to the responsible person and forget it. If it *is* your problem, get to work immediately on solving it.
- Reduce noise, distractions, and interruptions. Some large corporations insist that executives allow at least one fourth of their time for uninterrupted work.
- Do dreaded tasks first. Kiss a toad first thing every morning and the rest of the day will only get better. An unresolved dreaded task can be a major source of stress.
- Tackle problems one at a time. Give attention to the most important ones first.
- Take relaxation breaks whenever possible. A short walk away from the task at hand will help you to return to it in a fresher frame of mind.
- Schedule "appointments" with yourself and keep them. Have all calls held so that you have time to organize your thoughts and plan your activities.
- Give yourself completely to what you are doing. *Listen* to music, don't just hear it; digest a book, don't just scan it.
- Live in the present and future. Don't spend useless time regretting the past, since you can do nothing to change it.
- Credit others with sharing your good motives. When you and others are pursuing a common goal, there is nothing sinful about differences of opinion about ways that goal can best be achieved. Such differences might in fact be useful.
- Try to accept other people even if it is hard to love or like them. Give them the same benefit of the doubt that you would like to receive.
- Be cheerful even if wearing a smile half kills you. The habit is catching, and people like people who have positive attitudes.
- Keep constructively busy.
- And no matter how bad things get, always remember that "this, too, shall pass."

Things to avoid

Now for the other side of the coin, look at behavior that should be avoided in an effective stress management plan.

- Do not play roles that are contrary to your inner person. Stress can be created by trying to be someone you do not believe in, such as the "macho male," the "superwoman," or the "pillar of the church." These are acceptable roles for some, but only for those who firmly believe in them.
- Do not work on weekends or days off. Limit your weeknight involvement. Your family has as much right to you as does the community.
- Don't eat working meals.
- Don't push people around, socially or at work. Two people should be able to disagree philosophically with each other without getting into some sort of childish scrap. You want respect. Respecting yourself requires showing respect to others.
- Don't let others push *you* around; don't be a patsy.
- Do not let the sun set on your anger.
- Do not bottle up resentments or subject yourself to slow burns.
- Don't measure your life by single events.
- Don't make excuses for your actions and behavior; take responsibility for yourself and what you do.

In addition, try to develop an effective support system. In it you need to include three types of people:

Comforters: those, like your parents, who fully accept you for what you are, and will go all out to help you succeed.

Clarifiers: those who will probe issues with you and help you define and explore problems.

Confronters: people who will cause you to focus on issues or beliefs that you may not wish to face.

Commitment: A necessary ingredient

One final note: all the friends in the world and all the dos and don'ts for handling stress will be of little use if the stresses you feel are prolonged and seemingly unbearable. The most important thing for you to do when you feel this way is to seek professional help. Even a few visits with a social worker, clergyman, psychologist, or psychiatrist will help you sort things out and put your problems in perspective.

The key to any stress management technique—be it professionally guided or self-administered—is commitment. You have to *want* to succeed and be willing to work hard to bring contentment back into your life.

Many, many elementary and middle school principals have made that commitment and have learned how to keep stress at bay. You can, too.

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